

“Sincerely Yours, Paul”

1 Thessalonians 5.23-28

Paul loved the believers in Thessalonica; he couldn't return to visit them, so he wrote this letter. He has exhorted and encouraged them; now he 'farewells' them with a prayer, a few final thoughts, ending with a reminder for them to never lose sight of God's grace.

A Parting Prayer (23-24)

May the God of peace (the God who gives peace)...

...sanctify you entirely (may you be spiritually complete)...

...and may your spirit, soul, and body (every part of you)...

...be preserved complete, without blame (pure and holy)...

...at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (one day soon!).

Our faithful God will never fail us!

Final Considerations (25-28)

- *Pray for us*
- *Greet all from us, and read this letter to everyone*
- *Never lose sight of God's grace!*



1 Thessalonians 5.23-28

Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass. Brethren, pray for us. Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss. I adjure you by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brethren. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

When Christians think of the Apostle Paul, the man who traveled across the world of his day, facing hardships and persecution, evangelizing in places where the gospel had never been heard, planting churches, teaching theology to new believers, all while writing half the New Testament, we imagine being tough, focused, hardened, impersonal, a cross between Billy Graham and David Livingstone!

But something we don't usually realize is the heart Paul had for the unsaved, for the Jewish people, and for new believers. Over and over in his letters he expresses pain at not being able to see his converts. He weeps with the church leaders. He grieves over the unbelief of the Jews.

His deep emotion is especially evident at the end of his letters. Often he would take the pen from his amanuensis (a secretary who wrote as he spoke), and write in his own scrawling hand a few lines. This both to authenticate that the letter was from him (not a forgery), and to emphasize his personal love and concern for those to whom he was writing (cf. Gal. 6.11ff; 1 Cor. 16.21; Col. 4.18; 2 Thess. 3.17-18). That is what we find here.

The church in Thessalonica was on fire. The response to Paul's preaching had been instantaneous and dynamic. Paul was only with them for a month or two, but they soaked up everything he taught them, and when he was forced to leave because of persecution, they continued to stand strong for the faith. These Christians were a great encouragement to Paul. He loved them, and as he ends his letter, he wants to lift their spirits.

A Parting Prayer (23-24)

He begins with a benedictory prayer – invoking blessing on them. You need to notice something: Everything in this prayer is focused on what God can and will do for Christians. If our eternal destiny depended on our own efforts, none of us would survive. All would be lost. But Paul makes it clear that his trust is in what *God will do for them* – not what they will do. He never says, *Lord, help them to do this or that...* It's always *May God do this and that.*

May the God of peace Himself...

This was a common designation for Paul in his prayers, and reflected the full measure in which God gives peace. Jesus said to His disciples the night he was betrayed, *My peace I give to you, not as the world gives do I give to you* (Jn 14.27). As Paul explained in Rom. 5.1, because we have been justified by faith, *we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.* And that peace spread to all mankind: Jesus Christ *is our peace* – He breaks down the walls that divide us. God has made peace between us and Him through Jesus, and He is our source for peace going forward.

...sanctify you entirely

The word 'sanctify' means to be dedicated or set apart, but the goal is that we will be *spiritually complete*. God is a jealous God; He doesn't want just *part* of our lives. As James poignantly puts it in his epistle, like a jealous lover, God desires *all our affections*. *Friendship with the world is hostility toward God* (4.4)!

Paul prays that God will providentially act to cause us to be completely set apart to Him. Have you ever prayed that prayer for someone you love? I have. More to the point, have you ever prayed that pray for yourself? It's a dangerous prayer! You are asking God to act in your life in whatever way He will to bring you to the place where you are *totally His*.

...and may your spirit, soul, and body

Some theologians say that *spirit, soul, and body* are the three parts of a person. There are different descriptions of the parts of a man – but that misses the point here. This is a prayer, not an anthropology lecture. What Paul prays is that *every part of us* would be dedicated to the Lord.

The spirit is the highest and most unique part of man that enables us to communicate with God. The soul is the part of man that makes us conscious of ourselves; it is the seat of our personality. The body is how our inner person expresses itself and the way others recognize us. Paul is praying for God's will in our relationship with Him, in our inner personal lives, and in our contact with others. (See Tom Constable, *BKC*, 2:710).

...be preserved complete, without blame

Paul isn't praying that God would make us sinless – this side of heaven, that isn't possible. As John reminds us, *if we say we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves* (1 Jn. 1.8). *There is no one on earth who...does what is right and never sins* (Eccl. 7.20). But this is talking about the integrity of our lives – not pretending to be something we're not, not living a lie, but being transparent and authentic in our lives. Even when we trip and fall, we can keep our walk with God blameless by confessing our sin. When we do, His promise is that He forgives us our sins, and cleanses us from all unrighteousness (1 Jn. 1.9)! This is how we can be blameless.

...at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Both Paul and all the Christians in Thessalonica were waiting expectantly for the return of Christ. The prayer is that when Jesus comes, they will be walking faithfully with the Lord, anxious to meet Him.

Our faithful God will never fail us!

The last line of the prayer in v24 is classic Paul. In this letter he has had to call down some who were embracing sin or being lazy. But in the end, he expresses absolute faith in God to work in their lives: *Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass*. I love the way NT scholar Leon Morris captured this: *It is profoundly satisfying to the believer that in the last resort what matters is not his feeble hold on God, but God's strong grip on him*. (NICNT, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 183.)

In the final analysis, brothers and sisters, our confidence and assurance is in God keeping us, not in us achieving a necessary level of spiritual maturity. One of my favorite old hymns puts it this way:

*I know Whom I have believed,
And am persuaded that He is able
To keep that which I've committed
Unto Him against that day.* (Daniel W. Whittle, 1883)

Final Considerations (25-28)

Paul concludes the epistle with four short final thoughts.

- *Pray for us* (25)

After this prayer for the Christians in Thessalonica, Paul asks prayer for himself. Sadly, some Christians seem to think asking others to pray for you is a sign of weakness. Nothing could be further from the truth: It shows an awareness of our utter dependence on God each day. So Paul asks those young Christians to pray for him, the great apostle. He knew he needed it.

- *Greet all from us* (26)

Next he sends greetings to them. In some of his letters, Paul encouraged Christians to greet one another with a 'holy kiss' – a common sign of affection in that culture. But here it means something like 'Give everyone a kiss from me.' He has exposed some members of the church for their wrong practices – but this does not change his affection for them. All are to be greeted.

- *Read this letter to everyone (27)*

Furthermore, his letter is to be read *out loud* to the whole church. Why did Paul write this? We don't know. But whatever the reason, Paul wants them to know that he cares for *all of them*, and wants all of them to hear what he has to say.

- *Never lose sight of God's grace! (28)*

In the opening verse of this letter, Paul began by saying *Grace to you* (1.1). Now, in the last verse, he ends as he began: *The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.*

Let me suggest that this reflects something we must never forget: *The Christian life begins and ends with grace.* We'd never have received the gift of eternal life if not for God's grace. We'll never find victory in life with Christ apart from His grace. And the moment we step across the threshold of time to eternity, we'll do so only because of God's grace.

There are hundreds of subjects that are important to our Christian lives: Faith, prayer, repentance, self-denial, love, sacrifice, giving, hope, the Spirit, the resurrection, the cross – but undergirding all of them is grace. *Never lose sight of God's grace!*